

Reversing Polarity: Perspectives on the Development of Post-Secondary Education in the Canadian North

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Commentators agree that post-secondary education plays a pivotal role in the economic, social and political development of any society. Universities and colleges educate young people, train technicians and professionals and, in an information-intensive age, provide a region or a nation with the cutting-edge talent necessary for economic growth and social improvement. Researchers tackle problems of pressing concern and endeavour to offer solutions and create opportunities. In the race to capitalize on the opportunities of the digital age, countries and regions around the world continue to target post-secondary education as a top priority. So, too, it has been for the circumpolar world, where the last fifteen years has seen an expansion of educational opportunities, greater regional and international cooperation, and the early stages of the establishment of the University of the Arctic.

In the excitement and enthusiasm about contemporary initiatives, it is often easy to lose sight of how recent many of these developments have been and how tenuous some remain. Further, we often take universities and colleges for granted soon after they are established. (One commentator on Canadian universities observed that they are, to the late 20th century, what post offices were in the 19th century—tangible sign of the beneficence of a friendly

government.) The hard-won battles in Canada and elsewhere are symptomatic of the challenges facing northern regions and of the values and assumptions held by southern and metropolitan areas concerning more northerly zones.

Personal Reflections

As a high school student raised in the Yukon, I was educated in an environment that placed very little emphasis on post-secondary education. Only one university recruiter visited our high school in my graduating year. The student, an ex-Yukoner, spoke glowingly of the party life at the University of Alberta; most of the small number of us who chose to continue our studies at the time went to colleges and universities in British Columbia. The first year was, to put it simply, brutal and most of my Whitehorse classmates went home before the end of the first year. Their problem was not primarily academic—the Whitehorse contingent did much better than average, for example, on the University of British Columbia English proficiency test—nor was money a big issue for most, thanks to generous Yukon government assistance. Rather, the challenge lay in the transition from Whitehorse, population slightly more than 20,000 people in 1974, to Vancouver, with around a million residents. School had trouble competing with an endless round of movies, concerts, sporting events and the other distractions of a major city. We were, as a group, not at all prepared for the change and the difficulties of living so far from home, friends and family.

My experiences were far from unique. Across the country, northern regions traditionally sent very few students to universities and colleges and, in the 1970s at least, there were very few options available close to home. Regional participation rates languished, in part because high school graduates could often find high-paying jobs and had little financial incentive for

undertaking the costly and difficult process of relocating to southern campuses. The expansion of the community college system into the provincial North—in some areas offering first and second-year university transfer programs—addressed part of the problem and provided a welcome alternative to many students. Those students who ventured south, particularly if they had spent their life in the North, found themselves in a strange and disoriented setting. Life in Dawson City, Iqaluit or Moose Factory provided little preparation for the complexities and pressures of Montreal, Toronto or Vancouver. It is hardly surprising that many quickly returned to the North.

Twenty years to the week after I left Whitehorse for UBC, I was honoured to participate as founding Vice-President (Academic) in the opening ceremonies for the University of Northern British Columbia—an institution established with a central commitment to northern studies and regional needs. For many of those associated with the establishment of UNBC, the new university represented a deliberate attempt to address the shortcomings of the existing Canadian/British Columbia university and college system. British Columbia had a network of community colleges, including four based in the northern two-thirds of the province. While the colleges had made major contributions to the region, they had not raised participation rates to provincial levels and, because it was not part of their mandate, had not established a strong research presence in the region. In northern British Columbia, as in many comparable areas, the absence of a regional university became a matter of considerable public debate. Citizens throughout the region banded together to lobby for a publicly-funded university, only to encounter strong political opposition and much foot-dragging at the administrative level. Most civil servants appeared to doubt the viability of a northern university, particularly given the complexity and cost of several of the distributed institution models being bandied about. The most concentrated opposition by far came from the

existing community colleges (particularly the faculty), who feared that the establishment of a university would undermine their enrollments and jobs.

That UNBC came together demonstrated the resilience and determination of regional promoters and the founding staff at the institution. The mandate seemed, at times, unmanageably large: address the needs of First Nations, build a core campus in Prince George and satellite operations in a region larger than France and Germany combined, coordinate academic plans with the northern colleges and other provincial universities, convince the provincial government to fund the operation, and attract enough students to ensure the short- and long-term viability of the institution. Expectations of failure were very high—and not exclusively in the South. There was a fairly standard refrain along the lines of “You will not attract top notch faculty” and “You will never convince students from the South to come to UNBC.” The degree of oversight and suspicion of the enterprise at the provincial administrative and political level was daunting at times; politically, the government could not back away from the project, but uncertainty about the university continued. (It is worth noting, not without some chagrin, that British Columbia’s newest university, the Technical University of British Columbia, is based in Greater Vancouver and has been able to evolve with very little of the public and political intervention that dogged the founding of UNBC.)

The University of Northern British Columbia, while facing many of the challenges of all Canadian universities (limited funding and competition for students and faculty) and the unique ones of being a northern institution (high fuel and travel costs and regional responsibilities), has been a remarkable success. Over 1,100 students attended the first year, and enrollment after only six years is now approaching 3,000. Faculty members vastly exceeded most initial expectations in terms of research activity and productivity, and graduating students have enjoyed considerable success in the work force and in their

advanced studies. The university has undertaken innovative initiatives with First Nations, particularly a collaborative undertaking with the Nisga'a, and has established a substantial regional presence throughout northern British Columbia. The student participation rate in the region shot up, from around 8 percent before UNBC opened to close to 24 percent after only three years. (And, contrary to fears from community college faculty, the presence of the university actually increased college attendance.) Community involvement, the spark that started the university, remains very strong, and the research activity is spreading quickly throughout the North. UNBC has also been actively involved in circumpolar initiatives, including the establishment of the University of the Arctic and a very active series of exchanges with universities in Russia.

UNBC is clearly a success story, but it is not an unfamiliar tale. With different mandates and aspirations, institutions across the provincial and territorial Norths have variously addressed the challenges and needs of northern regions. Yukon College has done an exemplary job of bridging the conceptual gap between a research university and a technical college, creating an institution that continues to play a leading role in the development of northern studies and northern research programs. And so it goes, too, in other countries. The University of Alaska system, particularly the more research-intensive Fairbanks campus, is a formidable international force in northern research. Universities across the North have had similar histories and comparable impacts on their regions and on the understanding of the North generally. While all will agree that a great deal remains to be done, it is vital to remember the accomplishments of the past few decades.

But what, it is fair to ask, does it all mean? Is the issue simply one of accessibility, whereby northern institutions allow regional residents to study closer to home. Or are there more fundamental benefits and attributes associated with what can only be described as a revolution in post-secondary education?

The significance of the development of northern institutions is, I would argue, both substantial and transformative. The credit does not lie solely with the university faculty, students, staff and supporters, although their contributions are obviously crucial. That these institutions exist at all is often—as in the case of UNBC—due to determined efforts by the region itself. As such, the universities and colleges are both cause and symbol of the transformation of the place of the North within the nation, and worthy of consideration in that regard. What follows are personal reflections on what the development of post-secondary capacity in the North means to the region and the country.

Tackling Colonialism

Scholars have, for some time, noted on the connection between education and colonial systems. In the North, this is most graphically illustrated by educational efforts directed at Indigenous peoples, particularly residential schools. These government-funded and church-run institutions offered culturally loaded programs, designed to attack Indigenous values and customs and promote Euro-Canadian alternatives. As the non-Native population of the North, they experienced similar, although less intrusive, forms of cultural imperialism. Curricula and textbooks focussed on southern Canada; one looked in vain for signs of northern content in classroom instruction. For those few who ventured south from northern Canada to university or college, the ignorance of the North was generally profound (There were always exceptions, of course). Few universities offered courses in northern studies and national classes typically provided little, if any, coverage of regional themes.

In both structure and content, then, northern Canada continued to feel the impact of a colonial education system. And, as is standard in colonial regimes, the region developed a cultural and intellectual inferiority complex—the North

was not covered because it was not of much consequence. A few rebelled against the lack of attention to the North, but most seemed to accept it as a legitimate response to the political weakness, small population, and economic marginality of the region. Non-aboriginal northerners, in particular, looked to the South for educational leadership and opportunity—much as western Canada had gazed eastward to the shining lights of Toronto and Montreal, and as major Canadian cities looked with envy at Chicago, New York, London and Paris.

This meant, of course, that the North lost many young people and leading citizens to the South. If the North was, as it seemed to be, irrelevant and marginal, then clearly the action rested in southern cities. Students headed to the universities and colleges in the south, and those looking for careers and opportunities followed them. Few of either group ever managed to make their way back, reinforcing the notion that to stay in the North was to fall far short of one's potential. The talent drain to southern institutions and, over time, to the South itself, carried a substantial price for the region and helped to sustain the regional inferiority complex.

Those northerners who went South rarely saw their region reflected in the classrooms and study halls (with some notable exceptions due to the work of individual instructors or specific fields of inquiry). Few books and articles on northern themes could be found in libraries. The images presented of the North rarely strayed from vague generalities, snapshots of key events (reducing Yukon history, for example, to the Klondike Gold Rush), and stereotypes (images of pre-contact Inuit life were expanded to incorporate the entire North). As the North struggled for a more substantial place in Canadian life, university coverage rarely strayed from traditional impressions. Further, outside the natural sciences, research on the Canadian North was relatively slight. Each discipline produced a small cadre of northern scholars, linked

more by cross-disciplinary interest in northern studies than their own academic disciplines. Working with little recognition from their peers, these researchers managed through the 1960s and 1970s to create openings for a new generation of scholars (including a number raised in the North), but the collective impact was slight.

The process had become circular. A colonial education system entrenched a sense of regional inferiority and required students to leave for non-northern universities and colleges. Once there, and often already believing that the North did not matter a great deal, they discovered that the region was practically irrelevant in their studies. They might recoil at the inattention to the North or the simplistic rendering of their region in university texts and courses, but the message about the unimportance of the North came through very clearly. A few universities pioneered special northern studies programs and the federal government chipped in with financial support for student researchers, but these initiatives were isolated, often marginal on individual campuses (with the notable exceptions of northern studies efforts at the University of Alberta, McGill University, University of Calgary and, to a lesser extent, the University of Saskatchewan). In a systematic and national manner, the North had been put in its place—and the impression presented to students, the country and the North was neither accurate nor optimistic.

Re-orienting Post-secondary Education

The second wave of the expansion of post-secondary education in Canada—much less pronounced than the first—took root in the 1970s. Using colleges rather than universities as the tool of choice, provincial governments began to build northern educational capacity. (Universities had been the primary engine of post-secondary expansion in the 1960s.) Across the country, provincial

officials promoted and supported the development of new institutions, based primarily on technical and commercial programs. There was a message imbedded in this expansion: scholarship was an urban, southern activity, while resource industries were assumed to be the norm in the northern areas. There were a few exceptions, notably the aforementioned university transfer programs in the British Columbia community college system and a growing effort in the area of distance education (particularly through the Open University in British Columbia and Alberta's Athabasca University), but the pattern remained in place. Later, northern studies programs provided particularly keen university students with an opportunity to pursue their interests, but these offerings were small in size and number.

Not until the 1980s (with the first steps toward the establishment of Yukon College) and the 1990s (highlighted by the creation of UNBC) did the Canadian North begin to get a more substantial range of undergraduate opportunities. The result has been pronounced. Regional participation rates in post-secondary education increased dramatically, as did public interest in and knowledge of academic work. Brokered arrangements provided specialized undergraduate and graduate degree offerings from southern-based institutions, adapted for regional conditions. (These programs were primarily in the professional areas, such as teaching and social work.) New technologies, including satellite television and the Internet, have expanded the list of programs even further, with most of the degrees presented under cooperative arrangements with local institutions. Professional programs designed to address regional needs and with selective regional content filled a crucial gap in northern training and education, for it provided an alternative to the standard (and costly) practice of routinely importing short-term talent from southern Canada. Developing locally based expertise has been extremely valuable in addressing the North's long-standing difficulties with staff turn-over and

absence of regionally relevant preparation.

Although the effort remains relatively new, the signs of staunching the talent flow to the South are promising. Students are capitalizing on the opportunity to remain in their home regions, at least for a part of their post-secondary training. Further, and equally promising, institutions like UNBC and Yukon College (through exchange programs) are attracting sizable numbers of students and faculty from outside the region. The opportunity to study about the North while within the North can only strengthen their understanding of the area. Over time, mirroring the experience in Scandinavian countries, the “immigrants” to the North will add significantly to the national appreciation of northern realities and will assist the region in finding a more equitable place within the country’s economic and social systems. As well, a significant number will opt to remain in the region and will thus help reverse the historic talent drain from the North.

Northern Research: New Directions in Northern Scholarship

Perhaps the most profound illustration of the transformation of post-secondary education in the North can be found in the research field. At the most superficial level, there has been an increase in the volume of research activity, associated in part with the establishment of northern institutions, their promotional efforts, and a generally higher profile for northern issues across the country. But the measure of the quantity of research activity does not provide much of an illustration of the more substantial changes occurring in the field of northern research, ones that have transformed the field and that have, in many ways, thrust northern scholarship into the forefront of regional academic inquiry.

Relations with Indigenous groups have been particularly significant in

changing northern research. Scholars aware of the richness and complexity of the Indigenous world, and increasingly sensitive to the political and culture aspirations of First Nations and Inuit communities, have created partnerships in research. By working closely with Indigenous elders, bands and communities, these scholars have developed new protocols for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of academic knowledge. The cooperative thrust has some difficulties. Some scientists, for example, have difficulty with the claims made for traditional knowledge, and some social scientists are uncomfortable with the approval processes that are now standard for conducting research in Aboriginal communities. While many conceptual and administrative issues remain to be ironed out, the research that has emerged from lengthy and mutually beneficial collaborations has been remarkable and innovative. These investigations, which range across disciplines from science to business to cultural studies, have introduced new methods and important insights, and have established a framework for future research endeavours.

The involvement of northerners in research projects, either as principal investigators or, as the Northwest Territories has actively promoted for the past decade, as research assistants, has resulted in the emergence of a regional research capacity. Aided by government and non-governmental research funding, which has made it possible for researchers to establish a professional base in the Canadian North, the expanded research activity has resulted in an increasing number of studies written by and with people working in the region. This, in turn, increases the level of expertise and provides communities, governments, companies and other consumers of northern research with local resource people.

Northern-based scholars have argued, with justification, that the regionalization of northern scholarship has important intellectual ramifications. As experience in the Canadian North and elsewhere has shown, regionally based

scholars tend to ask different questions, ones arising out of lived experience, and often ask them in different ways. Historians, for example, traditionally examined the role and reaction of outsiders (explorers, government agents, police, etc.) to the region; the North-centred agenda focuses instead on change and continuity in northern society. Biological investigations now often integrate scientific research and guidance from elders. Much of the North—Centre research is targeted at real and pressing issues: land claims, self-government, devolution, constitutional change, environmental concerns, wildlife management, and the preservation of indigenous languages. The symmetry between scholarly and regional needs has produced an immediacy and relevance to northern scholarship that was not always in evidence in the past. There is, as well, a broader approach to the dissemination of research results, one that elevates sharing information and analysis with the community to a much higher level than is the norm for scholarly inquiry. The northern research agenda is not predicated on a rejection of earlier and current scholarship by non-northern scholars. In general, relations between the groups remain positive and symbiotic (some difficulties have emerged around matters such as the relative merits of traditional versus western scientific knowledge and about the control over research and the dissemination of research results associated with community protocols). The excitement rests not in the rejection of the established patterns of research but rather in the belief that a widening and deepening of scholarly investigations will enhance understanding of the North.

New Opportunities and Northern Initiative

In decades past, it was the lot of most northern regions to react to southern and national developments. Central governments determined the shape of economic and political activities, set policies for indigenous peoples, and

placed formidable constitutional barriers in the way of regional aspirations. Most non-Aboriginal northerners moved quickly in and out of the region, establishing a pattern of transiency that placed constraints on social and community relations. There was a sense, not unrealistically, of regional powerlessness. This meant, as late as the 1970s in Canada, that regional actions were largely responsive, with the South establishing the agenda.

The development of post-secondary education in the North suggests that this is no longer the case. Educational initiatives are tied more closely than ever to regional needs and aspirations. Universities and colleges serve the region, whereas in previous years these same institutions lured many of the best and brightest to the South. On numerous fronts, northern universities and colleges are setting or matching the standard for institutional cooperation. Interdisciplinary research and teaching is a hallmark of many northern programs. Cooperative and mutually advantageous arrangements with indigenous groups have established a benchmark for cross-cultural research and instruction. And initiatives like the University of Arctic demonstrate a profound enthusiasm for tackling the opportunity and promise of the digital revolution to harness regional intellectual power and technological developments to serve the interests of the circumpolar world.

More subtly, but most importantly, a transformation is underway in the basic understanding of the realities of the North. The transition has not been easy and tensions will remain. The struggle in recent years between proponents of the use of traditional knowledge in resource management and more formal scientists will likely be replicated in other fields. But a profoundly significant development is underway. Northern-raised and -based scholars are, in discipline after discipline, adding to lists of questions and answers, testing new paradigms and methods, and challenging existing scholarly understandings. A new, unofficial test—regional relevance—has been added to

the standard requirements for successful academic publication. An assertive North, with educational institutions, courses, programs, researchers and publishing outlets of its own, is offering a more comprehensive view of the North than was previously available.

This development rests, as well, on cooperation with southern institutions, students and researchers. The emergence of a new approach to northern teaching and scholarship is not predicated on a battle with the old order, but rather with active cooperation. Many southern-based academics work extremely well within the new framework for northern scholarship and participate actively with northern institutions. Similarly, numerous exciting educational initiatives are founded on cooperative offerings between southern and northern colleges and universities. A high degree of mutual respect and shared excitement has governed this process throughout, with many southern-based academics leading the cheering (and providing tangible support) for the emerging northern institutions. The new paradigm is not like that of other regional studies initiatives—rooted in anger, fuelled by grievance, and sustained by hostility (although elements of these can be found). Instead, the new northern scholarship is marked by cooperation, sensitivity and a belief that joint efforts enrich all participants and are in the best interests of the region itself.

A new image and vision of the North is emerging. The emergence of northern post-secondary institutions has added significantly to the resources and opportunities available for regional study and research. Across Canada—and how quickly this has changed—people no longer question the existence of Yukon College, are excited about the emergence and accomplishments of UNBC, understand why Nippissing University is now a university, and recognize the fundamental importance of research partnerships with indigenous peoples and northern communities. Efforts to understand the North generally

recognize the different contributions derived from the view from “within the North” and from that which comes from “outside the North.” Multidisciplinary and international cooperation is flourishing—perhaps to an extent not matched in any other regional and thematic field in Canadian scholarship. The work is far from complete. The North still struggles for a place in national academic and political agendas, and some of the funding that long sustained northern research is either gone or is at risk.

A polite but firm reversal has occurred. Thirty years ago, northern scholarship was sustained by a determined but often isolated band of southern-based academics. Their contributions, although rigorous and significant, scrambled for attention among peers and in university classrooms. Most students from the North had no choice but to venture south for their post-secondary training. The establishment of northern colleges and universities both reflects and sustains the new realities of northern scholarship and education. Students from the North now have what they have long deserved: the option to study in their home region. Students from across the country have opportunities that they long lacked: access to substantial course offerings in northern themes and, even more excitingly, the chance to pursue their studies at a northern institution. These processes—many still in their formative stages—have the potential to produce a much more comprehensive appraisal of the role of the North within Canada. More importantly, these initiatives are an integral part of the emergence of a new North, more active, more self-directed, less interested in following southern directions, more international, and more committed to cross-cultural understanding. In an age when post-secondary education matters more than ever, the Canadian North has the building blocks for a university/college system and an approach to regional scholarship that it requires to respond to the rapidly changing realities of the 21st century.

